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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 001770

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SUBJECT: MELES: ETHIOPIA FOLLOWING DIFFERENT "DEMOCRATIC"  
PARADIGM

REF: A. ADDIS 1347

[1](#)B. ADDIS 1587

[1](#)C. 2008 ADDIS 1154

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (S) Prime Minister Meles Zenawi told Ambassador Yamamoto on July 23 that Ethiopia is pursuing a "democratic" paradigm fundamentally different from that accepted by the United States. Meles stated that he rejects President Obama's assertion -- as posed in the President's July 11 speech in Ghana -- that "development depends on good governance" and democracy. Rather, Meles argued for economic performance-based criteria for assistance, as he asserted at the G-20 summit in April. Meles argued that history does not support this assertion and that this "Western paradigm" of democracy and development cannot be imported from abroad and applied to other countries. Meles argued that the United States' "old paradigm" is "wrong and closes off the emergence of organic democracy in Africa." The Prime Minister asserted that the United States' approach to development assistance through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) simply creates "another network of patronage" that prevents doing away with patronage in Africa. The Ambassador emphasized the United States' concern about Ethiopia's passage of restrictive laws (including those regarding civil society, the press, the financial services sector, antiterrorism, and political party registration) over the past two years. Meles responded that while the West may not appreciate these laws, they fundamentally expand possibilities for the people of Ethiopia and are not in conflict with Ethiopia's approach to democracy. The Prime Minister argued that the United States (and international community) must acknowledge that Ethiopia is pursuing a "rival paradigm" regarding democracy and development and the differences with the western paradigm are "fundamental, not technical." This fundamental schism between our "rival paradigms" further highlights the need for senior bilateral dialogue between the U.S. and Ethiopia as Embassy Addis has advocated (Ref. A). The Prime Minister's comments should serve as a foundation around which such a dialogue should be built and should inform how the United States engages Ethiopia in the future. End Summary.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR SENIOR BILATERAL DIALOGUE

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[1](#)2. (S) In his final call on Prime Minister Meles as Ambassador to Ethiopia, Ambassador Yamamoto noted the United States' interest in holding senior, interagency dialogue with Ethiopian officials this Fall. The Ambassador emphasized

that the existing tensions between our two countries are areas for discussion, but do not define our relationship. The Ambassador highlighted President Obama's comments in Ghana: Africa needs strong institutions, not strong leaders. The Ambassador suggested that senior bilateral discussions should focus on the nature and form of U.S. foreign assistance to Ethiopia, political stability in Ethiopia, and political space in Ethiopia -- particularly in light of a series of concerning laws passed by the Ethiopian Government (GoE) since 2005. The Ambassador noted that it will be important for the U.S. leaders to hear the philosophy behind Ethiopia's pursuit of these laws and whether they build or detract from strong institutions. He noted that if these laws, when taken together, close political space, it will be an issue.

#### THE WEST CANNOT IMPOSE DEMOCRACY ON OTHER COUNTRIES

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¶3. (S) Prime Minister Meles responded that he agreed with President Obama's statement that Africa needs strong institutions, but disagreed with the president's argument that "development depends on good governance" and democracy. Meles argued that there is "no proof that democracy and/or good governance are either necessary or sufficient for development." He argued that "democracy and good governance cannot be imported" because such an effort would be "wrong" and would "close off the emergence of organic democracy in Africa." The Prime Minister argued that the United States' approach to development assistance through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is, in fact, attempting to impose a

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certain form of democracy on other countries and simply creates "another network of patronage." By doing so, Meles argued that the United States' approach actually "prevents doing away with patronage in Africa and impedes democratic progress." Meles continued to argue comments he made at the G-20 summit in London on behalf of the African Union: that economic performance-based must be the criteria for assistance and is a better measure of development.

#### ETHIOPIA HAS CHOSEN A "RIVAL DEMOCRATIC PARADIGM"

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¶4. (S) Taking up the issue of laws recently passed by the GoE, Meles argued that "none of these laws restrict people's rights in any way," but rather that they actually "expand possibilities for the Ethiopian people." While acknowledging that provisions in these laws which western and donor countries perceive as restrictive are counter to, and in conflict with, the "old paradigm" of democracy, the Prime Minister stressed that they are not in conflict with democracy in Ethiopia. "Our approach is unified, not piecemeal, and these laws are consistent with our approach," the Prime Minister argued. Meles specifically stressed that the differences between these paradigms are "fundamental, not technical." As such, "it will not help if we address each individual issue (in bilateral discussions);" Meles said, "we must address our rival paradigms. Where we agree, we will continue. Where we disagree, it is fine, as long as (the disagreement) does not threaten (Ethiopia's) strategic interests." The Prime Minister went on to note that he "cannot imagine any action (by the GoE) that is not consistent with U.S. strategic interests." Meles went on to argue that bilateral dialogue should "leave out the minute policy issues" and stressed that we must discuss the fundamentals. "While you may not agree with us," he stressed, "you will understand where we are coming from, and vice versa."

¶5. (S) The Prime Minister noted that Ethiopia wants "a new paradigm in Washington regarding development" but lamented that the current approach is "well-entrenched." "U.S. assistance -- despite its many failures -- has delivered some help," Meles said, "but we know it can do much better." The

Ambassador confirmed that Ethiopia will continue to be a focal point for many U.S. development initiatives, but stressed that the United States wants to move beyond the persistent delivery of food aid to Ethiopia.

#### LINGERING FRICTIONS

16. (S) Meles stressed President Obama's point that democracy is a process before venting about U.S. criticism of Ethiopia.

"We do not accuse the U.S. of having a double standard, but we have problems when you mix apples and oranges," Meles noted. "The U.S. just does not acknowledge that we have made a different choice. We were created equal, so treat us equal. Do not lump us in league with Sudan or North Korea." The Prime Minister noted that he understands that "some in Congress do not like us, but the Administration also has not countered that. Resolutions (critical of Ethiopia) pass Congress because the Administration does not push back." Meles argued that Ethiopia is in brackets with Sudan because of "unfair criteria." "If you used the same criteria, you would focus on others who are far below us, but they are ignored by Congress." Meles argued that President Obama says that democracy is a choice, but if it is imposed, that is a contradiction. "You should hold us to a standard consistent with the approach, and peer group, that we choose."

#### WE WILL NOT CHANGE OUR LAWS

17. (S) The Ambassador referenced his conversation with Meles Advisor Berhanu Adello, in which Adello suggested that the U.S. should relax its concerns over seemingly-restrictive provisions in recently adopted laws, as the implementation of those laws remains to be seen (Ref. B). Meles quickly contradicted his advisor with "regardless of their implementation, that does not change the content of those laws. Restrictions on foreign funding to NGOs is not going to change. Those with hesitations about the text of those laws will have problems with their implementation. The bulk of the criticism (about these laws) is about their substance

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and that is not going to change."

#### COMMENT

18. (S) In Ambassador Yamamoto's final call on Prime Minister Meles as Ambassador to Ethiopia, Meles finally acknowledged verbally Ethiopia's fundamental difference with western approaches to democracy and development. The Prime Minister's frank statements confirm Embassy Addis Ababa's consistent argument over the past two years: Ethiopia's political strategy is fundamentally different from any sense of "democracy" as commonly understood in the United States or western countries. Despite the second word in the GoE's prevailing ideology, "Revolutionary Democracy" (Ref. C) reflects an approach to governance and development that, while arguably FOR the people, is neither OF, or BY, the people. Instead, Ethiopia is clearly (through its actions) and intentionally (as confirmed by the Prime Minister) pursuing a top-down approach through which political, economic, and even social activity must be either directed or condoned by the government (and ruling party). That which is not will be suppressed. As we argue in Ref. A, this trend fundamentally has eroded stability -- and, hence, U.S. interests -- in Ethiopia. While we accept the Prime Minister's (and President Obama's) argument that we should not impose any system of governance on Ethiopia, it is critical for us to understand the deep differences between our countries and recalibrate our engagement to protect, and better advance, U.S. interests in this fragile region. End Comment.  
YAMAMOTO